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THE SEARCH FOR FORM; THE VERSE DRAMAS OF T.S. ELIOT

by

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B.A. Whitman College, 1957

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degree of

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Chairman, Board of Examiners


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INTRODUCTION

It is an obvious observation that, since the passing of the nineteenth-century imitators of Shakespeare, the British and American theaters have been dominated by prose, rather than verse, drama. The major reasons for that dominance are also obvious: the "artificial" language of poetry, particularly as it was used by Browning and Shelley and minor "dramatists" of the last century, has grown farther and farther away from the idiom of modern speech. This was a disastrous development in a theater moving doggedly toward realism, and verse drama had almost completely disappeared by the start of the current hundred years. There have been exceptions to the dominance of prose drama, of course; the most notable, perhaps, are J. M. Synge and W. B. Yeats, both of whom wrote plays concerning the Irish people, traditionally a "primitive" group who might be supposed to use a kind of rude, rhythmic poetry in their everyday lives. This theme, easily exhausted, was one possibility for verse drama in our day; another direction -- that of ritual themes whose liturgical quality would call naturally for verse -- was the one taken by Eliot when he first turned his genius to the theater, in an attempt to regain a place for poetic expression on stage.

With The Rock, commissioned on behalf of the fund to preserve the old churches of London and performed at Sadler's Wells in 1934, Eliot made his first full-length attempt at drama although, strictly viewed, The Rock is more pageant

than play. The situation does not give rise to any intense struggle or conflict; the structure consists of a series of scenes of related tones, scenes which develop the theme of the building of the Church, its various crises and its triumph. The scenario was provided by Martin Browne, and Eliot's job was to fit the dialogue to it. The bulk of that dialogue is in prose and furnishes a text to accompany music and ballet; the passages of prose, which total several hundred lines, are for the most part spoken by the chorus and are the kind of meditative poetry found in Four Quartets. But one of the most exciting of the scenes, in which the Church is confronted by Redshirts, Blackshirts and Plutocrats, is also entirely in verse and shows Eliot beginning to deal with contemporary situations in verse.

But because The Rock is not wholly Eliot's invention and is not, really, a play, it will not be discussed in this paper. The first play which is entirely his, Murder in the Cathedral, written for the Canterbury Festival the following year and, again, a ritualistic drama, will mark the starting point of Eliot's search for a suitable form for modern verse drama.

Neither will his first attempt at theater, the "fragments of an Aristophanic melodrama, Sweeney Agonistes, be discussed at length here. Published in The Criterion for October 1926 and January 1927, they mark a suggestion not taken up later by the poet-playwright once he had turned in earnest to drama. The "agon" seems to be Eliot's version

of musical comedy, and he uses as a source of the verse dialogue, vaudeville rhythms,¹ and of the songs, American jazz. Such rhythms, when used to present the Eliotian theme of isolation of the sensitive in a visionless world with which they cannot communicate -- Sweeney, in his meditations on "birth, copulation and death," is not understood at all by the material, literal-minded Doris and Dusty and the visitors to their flat -- and when introduced by the epigraphs from the Choephori and St. John of the Cross, seem not serious enough and too startling to be carried on throughout a play of any length.

But, while Eliot did not continue in the direction pointed by Sweeney Agonistes, neither did he rely very long on the liturgical form and religious themes of The Rock and Murder in the Cathedral. As he worked more and more with the medium of the theater, Eliot could be seen evolving a form for modern verse drama which seemed to him to be workable. His first move was to abandon the historical and to turn, in The Family Reunion and later plays, to contemporary situations and characters. After the strange formalities of the second play, he can be seen discarding or modifying the old conventions of theater -- particularly the chorus -- until the only strictures on form are the order-giving themes from Greek drama and the discipline of verse. And these changes in the plays

¹For reasons given in his essay in appreciation of the music-hall artist, Marie Lloyd, Selected Essays, pp. 405-8.

are accompanied by statements of the theories behind them, statements to be found in his own critical essays.

It would be helpful if Eliot had published a complete, orderly statement of his theories of dramatic poetry, against which the student could compare the plays, but for the most part reference must be to random statements scattered throughout a large and wide-ranging body of criticism, for Eliot has long been interested in the peculiar difficulties of writing dramatic verse in the twentieth century. The two major essays devoted exclusively to the goals and difficulties of modern poetic drama, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" (1928) and "Poetry and Drama" (1951), span the years in which he was wrestling with those very problems in producing his first three plays, and are thus very pertinent particularly to those plays. In the latter essay, in fact, Eliot discusses frankly the weaknesses of the plays and his intent in each, a discussion which is made use of in the individual analyses in this paper. It is in the "Poetry and Drama" essay, too, that the poet's latest statement of an ideal for dramatic verse is found, an ideal which he admits to be unattainable:

...It is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it. The painter works by selection, combination, and emphasis upon the elements of the visible world; the musician in the world of sound. It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed toward action -- the part of

life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express -- there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action...This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity. At such moments we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express...²

Leading up to this sweeping statement of Eliot's ambitions for modern verse drama, however, are numerous observations, comments and criticisms which furnish subtle shadings for whatever general "theory" of theater may be attributed to him. Particularly rich in such hints are the essays arising from the poet's interest in the late Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. It is in one of these essays that he points out the major flaw of modern drama by stating the shared weakness of the two ages:

...since Kyd, since Arden of Feversham, since The Yorkshire Tragedy, there has been no form to arrest...the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likenesses to the reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind...[The Elizabethan dramatists'] great weakness is the same weakness as that of modern drama, it is a lack of a convention.³

Convention, to Eliot, does not necessarily mean convention of subject matter, treatment, form, philosophy or any other

² Of Poetry and Poets (London, 1957), pp. 86-7.

³ "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," Selected Essays, p. 93.

convention which has already been used, but may be "some quite new selection or structure or distortion in subject matter or technique; any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action."⁴

Because Eliot feels this need for a shape imposed by art upon modern life, because he makes one of the requirements of poetic drama the taking of genuine and substantial emotions, such emotions as observation can confirm, typical emotion," and then the giving to them of artistic form,⁵ he finds perpetual fascination in the Unities and expresses the belief that they "will be found highly desirable for the drama of the future."⁶ It would seem, on this point, that Eliot's interpretation of the Unities is nearer that of the neo-classicists than of the enlightened re-interpreters of Aristotle, since his support of them is based on the concentration which they would affect in a theater "whose plays are now much too long."⁷ That is, by observing the arbitrary unities of time and place (which he does only in the first two plays), as well as that of action, Eliot would predict the result to be shorter, more intense plays.

Eliot's statement of belief in the Unities leads one to question his views on other aspects of the form of Greek

⁴ "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," Selected Essays, pp. 93-4.

⁵ "Rhetoric and Poetic Drama," Selected Essays, p. 29.

⁶ "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," Selected Essays, p 45.

⁷ Ibid.

drama, particularly on the use of a chorus. The adaptation of Greek forms is a problem which has interested dramatists in all neo-classic traditions, and Eliot, a self-confessed classicist, proves no exception. His most specific appraisal of the possibilities of such adaptation in our time was made after he had finished his own experiments with the chorus in his first plays and is included in the 1944 essay on Dr. Johnson:

But the real question is whether the form of Greek drama can be naturalized for the modern world. And I suspect that the chief justification for Milton, as for some later poets, in imitating the Greek form of drama, is that the use of a chorus enables poets with no skill in the theatre, to make the most of their accomplishments,⁸ and thereby conceal some of their defects.

The final statement of the poet, however, may be assumed to be his abandonment of the Greek forms, if not the Greek themes, for the purposes of his own plays.

An alternative to Greek conventions, stated in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" in 1928, was something approaching the pure form of religious liturgy. The question is put by "E:"

But when drama has ranged as far as it has in our own day, is not the only solution to return to religious liturgy?

The answer received is that we want "the human drama, related to the divine, but not the same, as well as the Mass."⁹ The

⁸ On Poetry and Poets, p. 176.

⁹ Selected Essays, p 35.

most obvious use Eliot makes of the latter conclusion is, of course, in Murder in the Cathedral, a play which concerns action that is both human and divine. But the problem of religion as it concerns form does not seem to be a lasting one for Eliot, as it ceases to occur in his later criticism, after he has abandoned obviously religious plays for more subtle uses of the spiritual.

In addition to the need for conventions for verse drama, the problem of form for Eliot is one of the kind of language to be used. That language must be verse, of course, because:

...The human soul, in intense emotion,
strives to express itself in verse...if
we want to get at the permanent and uni-
versal, we tend to express ourselves in
verse.¹⁰

But the problem does not end there; knowing that the master of English playwrights, Shakespeare, alternated between verse and prose in many of his plays, Eliot ponders how much prose is admissible in the projected verse drama of today:

A mixture of prose and verse in the same
play is generally to be avoided: each tran-
sition makes the auditor aware, with a
jolt, of the medium.¹¹

He admits prose to be justifiable, however, when the author wishes to produce such a jolt, to transport the auditor violently from one plane of emotion to another. However, he advises that it be used sparingly even for that purpose and would aim instead for a form of verse in which "everything

¹⁰ Selected Essays, p. 35.

¹¹ "Poetry and Drama," On Poetry and Poets, p. 73.

can be said that has to be said."¹²

The danger is a verse form with so wide a range that it can say anything that has to be said is, Eliot realizes, that it will not always be "high poetry." Passages of less intense poetry, in which less intense emotions will have to be expressed in such a form, will be in relation to the level on which the total poem operates "prosaic," but Eliot finds a place in poetry for the prosaic:

Dissonance, even cacophony, has its place: just as, in a poem of any length, there must be transitions between passages of greater and less intensity, to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole.¹³

If the prosaic, though not prose itself, is present in Eliot's scheme for the medium of verse drama, the poetically ornamental is not. In his 1940 essay on Yeats, Eliot commends his fellow poet-playwright for "the gradual purging out of poetical ornament," terming that purging the most painful part of the labor for a modern poet who would write a play in verse. "The course of improvement," he adds, "is towards a greater and greater starkness."¹⁴

The course of improvement, in Eliot's view, also lies in the avoidance of blank verse. One reason given for the impossibility of that particular form for modern verse in drama is that so much great non-dramatic poetry has been

¹²"Poetry and Drama," On Poetry and Poets, p. 74.

¹³"The Music of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets, p. 32.

¹⁴On Poetry and Poets, p. 259.

written in it in the last three hundred years, by Milton particularly.¹⁵ The other reason is that it was the form used by Shakespeare and thus offers the trap of imitation:

Anyone who tries to write poetic drama, even today, should know that half of his energy must be exhausted in the effort to escape from the constricting toils of Shakespeare; the moment his attention is relaxed, or his mind fatigued, he will lapse into bad Shakespearian verse.¹⁶

The medium for modern verse drama, then -- a verse drama employing certain conventions -- would be one which avoids passages of prose, but admits the prosaic in verse. It must avoid the "ornamental" poetry which undid the nineteenth century poet-dramatists; and it will not be blank verse but one in which:

...we shall be able to hear the speech of contemporary human beings, in which dramatic characters can express the purest poetry without high-falutin and in which they can convey the most commonplace messages without absurdity.¹⁷

This is the form which we should expect Eliot's plays to take.

But it must be remembered that this concept of modern verse drama developed over a period of years in which the poet was struggling with drama and proving the strengths and weaknesses of his own theories. Each play is a study

¹⁵ "The Music of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets, pp. 34-5.

¹⁶ "Milton (II)," On Poetry and Poets, p. 150.

¹⁷ "The Music of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets, p. 38.

of unique form,¹⁸ and the plays viewed as a whole are a fascinating record of a contemporary poet's search for the proper form for twentieth-century verse drama.

¹⁸ In this study of Eliot's evolution of a form for modern verse drama, interpretations of the plays will not be discussed except where they are influenced extensively by the verse patterns or other devices of form.

I. THE FORMAL PATTERN

Looking back in "Poetry and Drama" (p. 80) over fifteen years to his first attempt to create a workable modern verse drama, Eliot found in Murder in the Cathedral mostly negative merit: it succeeded in avoiding what had to be avoided -- Shakespearian blank verse or the dramatic language of the nineteenth century -- but:

...it arrived at no positive novelty: in short, in so far as it solved the problem of speech in verse for writing to-day, it solved it for this play only, and provided me with no clue to the verse I should use in another kind of play.

The problem of language in this play is admittedly a special one, since it involves a central figure of historic reality, Thomas a Becket, in a situation which Eliot feels to be relevant to contemporary life. Thus, the vocabulary and style could not be those of modern conversation because the audience must be reminded of the historical event; they could not, on the other hand, be archaic because archaism would weaken the implication of contemporaneity.

The versification taken as a model, then, is that of the fifteenth-century morality, Everyman, employing alliteration and assonance while avoiding much use of the iambic metre which has overwhelmed English verse since Shakespeare. To this basic versification he added occasional and unexpected rhyme, thereby achieving a "neutral" language committed neither to past nor to present. The idiom is an effective

mixture of patterned, formal speech such as may be found in religious liturgy and colloquial, informal expression, a mixture which modulates gracefully to fit each character's personality.

This play which contains nothing of the "prosaic" does include two passages of prose: the sermon, which separates the two parts of the play, and the speeches of the Knights. Eliot justifies the first of the two passages which could not have been written in verse by claiming that a sermon cast in verse would be "too unusual an experience for even the most regular churchgoers: nobody would have responded to it as a sermon at all..." (p. 81). That is, the audience would be too aware that they were listening to verse, whereas Eliot wishes verse drama to be a natural, though very intense, form. The speeches of the Knights are in platform prose for a special effect: to shock the audience out of complacency, out of the feeling that the action on stage does not involve them. Eliot admits that this is a "trick" and suitable for use in one play only. It is, however, an effective trick.

A third general observation that may be made about the form of the first play is that it makes use of a convention drawn from Greek drama, a chorus which comments on the action and reflects the moods of the play. Eliot confesses that he uses the chorus partly to cover his weaknesses as a dramatist: "...a poet writing for the first time for the stage is much more at home in choral verse than in dramatic dialogue..."

(p. 81). But he also uses it for the purely aesthetic reason that the action of the play, concentrating as it does on the death and martyrdom of the archbishop, is somewhat limited. The introduction of a chorus of excited women, reflecting in their emotion the significance of the action, helps to intensify and extend the play.

It is this chorus in a mood of dark foreboding, that opens the play in the traditional parados of the Greek chorus. The verse form used by the group of women alternates long-lined, lyric passages with passages of four-beat lines (scanned in syllabic stresses rather than "feet"), as in the second movement of the entering song:

Seven years and the summer is over
Seven years since the Archbishop left us,
He who was always kind to his people.
But it would not be well if he should return,
King rules or barons rule;
We have suffered various oppression...¹⁹

The imagery of the choral passages suggests both Oedipus Rex, with the lament over the plague on the city, and the landscape of The Waste Land. It is imagery of a cruel spring and an infertile land:

Since golden October declined into sombre
November
And the apples were gathered and stored,
and the land became brown points of
death in the waste of water and mud,

¹⁹ Citations from Murder in the Cathedral, The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party are to The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York, 1952).

The New Year waits, breathes, waits, whispers
in darkness
While the labourer kicks off a muddy boot
and stretches his hand to the fire,
The New Year waits, destiny waits for the coming.

The repetition of key words in the choral passages (martyrs, saints, rules, destiny, order), added to the long, smooth phrasing, gives somewhat the same impression as the keening women in the plays of Yeats and Synge.

More an extension of the Chorus than individual characters are the three Priests of the play. They act as leaders of the Chorus, with three-way conversations among themselves and with the Chorus and Thomas giving a contrapuntal effect to the scenes. The Priests speak in much the same rhythm as the Chorus, even picking up certain phrases and images from it, as when the First Priest speaks:

Seven years and the summer is over
Seven years since the Archbishop left us...

The function of the Priests differs somewhat from that of the Chorus, as they concentrate on advancing the action rather than on interpreting or intensifying it. At the beginning of the play, they give the political setting in more definite terms than do the Women of Canterbury; throughout, they are more practical and less "emotional" and they speak less real poetry.

Interrupting the formalistic speech pattern of the Chorus and the Priests is the Herald, speaking in an approximate hexameter. His announcement is couched in formal language also, but it is different from the lyric high-poetic

verse of the earlier speakers; he prepares for the modern-British-colloquial prose of the old-school Knights in the second part of the play, with his bureaucratic idiom: "You are right to express a certain incredulity..." His is the most modern idiom up to this point in the play.

As the Priests once more begin to speak, a gradual movement into rhyme is started, bringing about a heightening of emotion and tension as the reader or listener is forced to pay close attention to each word. These rhymes are at first only occasional and seemingly unintentional, as "prosperity" with "adversity," or the parallel couplet:

Pride drawing sustenance from impartiality,
Pride drawing sustenance from generosity.

Now the lines as a whole are longer, but they are composed of short sentences, often breaking in the center to give the caesura characteristic of Anglo-Saxon (among others) poetry. With the caesura-marked line, obvious internal and mid-line rhyme patterns start to emerge:

For good or ill, let the wheel turn.
The wheel has been still, these seven years,
and no good.
For good or ill, let the wheel turn,
For who knows the end of good or evil?

Occasional rhymes begin to occur with greater distances between them, as in the lines:

Succeeded in avoiding notice,
Living and partly living.
There have been oppression and luxury.
There have been poverty and licence.
There has been minor injustice...

What may or may not be a half-rhyme, "licence" with "notice"

and "injustice," is one of several that are suggested in the same passage: "Cyder" with "winter" and "terrors" with "fears."

As the time for the Archbishops arrival nears and tension increases, the verse becomes more intense, both in imagery and metre. The Chorus has always used concrete, common and earthy imagery, but the realization of this technique is nowhere made more clearly than with the homely simile:"...our brains unskinned like the layers of an onion."(This and the animal imagery which later emerges strongly emphasize the knowledge that the followers of Becket are "small folk who live among small things.") Just prior to Thomas's entrance, the verse lines swell to paragraph length, as with the last line of the Chorus:

O Thomas, Archbishop, leave us, leave us,
leave sullen Dover, and set sail for
France. Thomas our Archbishop still our
Archbishop even in France. Thomas Arch-
bishop, set the white sail between the
grey sky and the bitter sea, leave us,
leave us for France.

When the Archbishop enters, he speaks in a verse that is tight, rich and powerful, marked by alliteration, repetition and incantation that is part of the other verse but is also unique. There is in his speech none of the hysteria of the Chorus of Women or the Priests and none of the vulgarity of the Tempters and Knights. Though the length of his lines is not constant, the metre is predominantly iambic. And it is Thomas who first uses a very extended metaphor -- and continues to use them -- significantly, this first time, making use of the animal imagery:

For a little time the hungry hawk
Will only soar and hover, circling lower,
Waiting excuse, pretence, opportunity,
End will be simple, sudden, God-given.

With the Tempters, who enter almost immediately after the Archbishop has spoken, is provided the most striking example of the fitting of verse pattern and idiom to the personality of the individual speaker. The First Tempter, he of the good old gay times, of the court, speaks with an "engaging" bluntness which only on close scrutiny reveals its subtle rhyme and alliteration. The rhymes are end-sound or consonantal, for the most part, as in the long series: favour, river, together, sever, recover, over. Most Anglo-Saxon of the speakers thus far, the First Tempter uses Everyman stanzas: the sharply divided, two unit lines in a dipodic convention probably picked up through Middle English, and the heavily stressed alliteration which, to emphasize the matching sounds, cuts out intervening articles and other "unnecessary" words:

 ...and of the new season.
Spring has come in winter. Snow in the branches
Shall float as sweet as blossoms. Ice along
 the ditches
Mirrors the sunlight. Love in the orchard
Send the sap shooting. Mirth matches melancholy.

Now, in the dialogues with the Tempters, rhyme begins to occur so consistently that the absence of it in a few scattered lines becomes conspicuous. Most lines eventually find rhyme, although, as in the following sample, nine lines may intervene between "gait" and its companions, "late" and "fate:"

Not at this gait!
If you go fast, others may go faster.
Your Lordship is too proud!
The safest beast is not the one that
 roars most loud.

This was not the way of the King our master!
You were not used to be so hard upon sinners
When they were your friends. Be easy, man!
The easy man lives to eat the best dinners.
Take a friend's advice. Leave well alone,
Or your goose may be cooked and eaten to the
 bone.

THOMAS: You come twenty years too late.

TEMPTER: Then I leave you to your fate.

It is worth noting in the passage, too, that all but one line are end-stopped, both in meaning and punctuation, characterizing the Tempter as one who speaks mechanically, often in cliches which produce such ironic rhymes as "sinners" and "dinners."

The Second Tempter, who is a Machiavellian politician, is more alliterative than rhyming in his verse, in contrast to his predecessor. His speeches are close to Anglo-Saxon, so heavily alliterated that they seem parodies, as in: "A templed tomb, monument of marble..." and: "Cabined in Canterbury, realmless ruler..." He, too, speaks generally in end-stopped lines, probably to indicate much the same character as the First Tempter, with the polished syntax of the politician laid over as veneer. His Machiavellianism is not only an historical characterization but is also sharply influenced by contemporary politics of self-interest:

Yes! Men must manoeuvre. Monarchs also,
Waging war abroad, need fast friends at home.
Private policy is public profit;
Dignity still shall be dressed with decorum.
THOMAS: You forget the bishops

Whom I have laid under excommunication.
TEMPTER: Hungry hatred
Will not strive against intelligent
self-interest.

The effect of so much alliteration is that the audience, beguiled by the ingenuity involved in finding words with identical sounds, begins to listen carefully to each word and even to anticipate the next; such careful listening, even when it is inspired by pure sounds, has as a result complete and immediate understanding of each word as it occurs and, since each important word is alliterated with another, complete and immediate understanding of each phrase as it emerges. This close scrutiny, then, reveals the arguments for the empty things they are, and it is easy to understand that Thomas rejects them easily.

The Third Tempter, who argues for the barons, speaks in slightly rougher language than his fellowe. His characteristic speech relies less on alliteration, almost not at all on rhyme, but he is like the others in that his lines are end-stopped. Claiming to be a "country-keeping lord," he nevertheless speaks as subtly as any courtier or politician:

...Purpose is plain.
Endurance of friendship does not depend
Upon ourselves, but upon circumstance.
But circumstance is not determined.
Unreal friendship may turn to real
But real friendship, once ended, cannot be mended.
Sooner shall enmity turn to alliance.
The enmity that never knew friendship
Can soother know accord.

Eliot's device to surprise, the unexpected rhyme, occurs internally in the sixth line above, with "ended" and "mended" bringing back to focus attention that may have wandered in

This is the unexpected, the inner voice urging the right action for the wrong reason, and he speaks in the pattern and idiom of the Archbishop. He employs far-separated rhymes which give a subtle, vague echo to the lines. Both internal and end rhymes are used consistently in this last dialogue.

with inner rhyme and alliterative sounds becoming dominant in the final choruses of the Women of Caterbury, the three Priests and the four Tempters.

The three choral groups then perform a verbal ballet, speaking in alternation which employs a very subtle, blending pattern of rhymes of the "all" sound, giving such unity to the three types of speakers that they would seem one except for the varying qualities of their voices:

- C. Is it the owl that calls, or a signal
 between the trees?
P. Is the window-bar made fast, is the door
 under lock and bolt?
T. Is it rain that taps at the window, is
 it wind that pokes at the door?
C. Does the torch flame in the hall, the
 candle in the room?
P. Does the watchman walk by the wall?
T. Does the mastiff prowl by the gate?
C. Death has a hundred hands and walks a
 thousand ways.
P. He may come in the sight of all, he may
 pass unseen, unheard.
T. Come whispering through the ear, or a
 sudden shock on the skull.
C. A man may walk with a lamp at night, and
 yet be drowned in a ditch.
P. A man may climb the stair in the day, and
 slip on a broken step.
T. A man may sit at meat, and feel the cold
 in his groin.

The Chorus has a final speech, divided into two parts; the first is a lyric made up of very short lines of two and three accents, and the second resembles a chant, with little indication of where the lines would end if it weren't for the occasional rhymes. The Archbishop's speech which ends the first part of the play is smooth in metre, marked by end rhymes which often form couplets, and reaches a climax in

grace, dignity and richness; he has made his decision for the right reason, and is willing to submit completely to God's will. This "action" of decision is not one which can be demonstrated on the stage, but Eliot has tried to dramatize it by the conflicts with the Tempters, making them all -- including the Fourth -- personifications of the warring elements in Thomas's character. The serenity of Thomas's final speech, which is surely "high poetry," would indicate that the decision has been made and can be taken as evidence of the resolution of the internal struggle.

The second part of Murder in the Cathedral opens much as does the first, with a choral lament over the "bitter spring," but the Women of Canterbury have begun, slowly, to reflect the attitude of Thomas toward martyrdom; they have begun to see the hope that such a death promises:

The peace of this world is always uncertain,
 unless men keep the peace of God.
And war among men defiles the world, but
 death in the Lord renews it,
And the world must be cleaned in the winter,
 or we shall have only
A sour spring, a parched summer, an empty
 harvest.

The new characters, four Knights, appear early in the scene, and one expects them to talk and act much like the Tempters, if only because there are the same numbers of both. But these are not politicians or courtiers; they are secular businessmen, unconcerned with subtleties, anti-imagistic, speaking in automatic metres and mechanical rhymes. The end

rhymes in their speeches are unimaginative, with "jack" and "back" matched as they would be in nursery rhymes. There is not the shading of speech patterns among them that there is among the Tempters, but rather all speak alike; and it is natural to hear them speak in unison, at which times there are careful patterns of internal and end rhymes:

You are the Archbishop in revolt against
the King; in rebellion to the King
and the law of the land.
You are the Archbishop who was made by the
King; whom he set in your place to
carry out his command.
You are his servant, his tool and his jack,
You wear his favours on your back,
You had your honours all from his hand; from
him you had the power, the seal and the
ring.

In contrast, Thomas a Becket's speech becomes even more carefully, intelligently and subtly patterned, with a large number of run-on lines. More and More half-rhymes carry the weight of the verse, making the sound echo more distant, but --perhaps because one enjoys playing the game along with Eliot -- more striking and noticeable. Thus, "treason" rhymes with "malfeasance," and "Rome" with "tomb" and again with "throne." And, even more subtly, the end rhyme of "son" echoes the "person" in the middle of the same line:

It is not I who insult the King,
It is not I, Becket from Cheapside,
It is not against me, Becket, that you strive,
It is not Becket who pronounces doom,
But the law of Christ's church, the judgement
of Rome.
Go then to Rome, or let Rome come
Here, to you, in the person of her most un-
worthy son.
Petty politicians in your endless adventure!

Rome alone can absolve those who break
Christ's indenture.

As the Knights give Thomas a respite, the Chorus takes up an incantation of foreboding of death, using some of the most lyrically horrible language to be found in poetry. Not only is the passage memorable for the statement of the terrifying, but it is also worth technical consideration for its complex verse patterns formed with a remarkable use of internal rhymes. The "savour of putrid flesh in the spoon," for example, occurs in the middle of a line and recalls the end rhyme, "noon," used two lines previously. A more complicated use can be seen in the "awn" endings clustered in the following lines:

Grey necks twisting, rat tails twining, in
the thick light of dawn, I have eaten
Smooth creatures still living, with the strong
salt taste of living things under the
sea; I have tasted
The living lobster, the crab, the oyster, the
whelk and the prawn; and they live and
spawn in my bowels, and my bowels dis-
solve in the light of dawn. I have smelt
Death in the rose...

Also contributing to the force of the passage is, of course, the overpowering use of animal imagery, pre-suggesting the bestiality of the drunken Knights as they attack Thomas at the altar. This imagery is climaxed by the Chorus: "...like a pattern of living worms/In the guts of the women of Canterbury."

Supporting Eliot's theory that intense emotion strives to express itself in verse, Becket speaks in beautiful, meta-

phorical poetry as he approaches death. Contrasting with the strong, graceful, moving verse which Thomas utters is the doggerel chant of the Knights, which abuses the Biblical phrases it borrows without understanding:

Where is Becket, the traitor to the King?
Where is Becket, the meddling priest?
Come down Daniel to the lions' den,
Come down Daniel for the mark of the beast.

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you marked with the mark of the beast?
Come down Daniel to the lions' den,
Come down Daniel and join in the feast.

Where is Becket the Cheapside brat?
Where is Becket the faithless priest?
Come down Daniel to the lions' den,
Come down Daniel and join in the feast.

The ultimate irony here is that the beasts, in the midst of their non-human act, speak in beast imagery.

As Thomas is set upon and killed, the Chorus cries in desperate fear and despair:

Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind!
take stone from stone and wash them.
The land is foul, the water is foul, our
beasts and ourselves defiled with blood.
A rain of blood has blinded my eyes. Where is
England? where is Kent? where is Can-
terbury?
O far far far in the past; and I wander in a
land of barren boughs: if I break them,
they bleed; I wander in a land of dry
stones: if I touch them, they bleed.

Certainly when the Knights enter and, drunk, begin to justify the murder to an audience that sits to judge them eight hundred years after the crime, the contrast of the intense poetry of the Chorus with the very prosaic prose of

Reginald Fitz Urse is almost unbearable. All the Knights speak in much the same manner and idiom; they are Eton and Harrow boys, appealing to the public in the name of self-justification. They are liberalism and secularism, and they do not even realize the religious fact of their murder. Here is Eliot at his best, using comic language to make a serious point and intensifying, by contrast, the preceding scene. If this is a "trick," it is an effective one in this situation.

Having involved the people of Canterbury and, by implication, the modern world, in their guilt, these four champions of conformity and mediocrity leave the stage to the final, poetic lament of the Priests and Chorus. This final lament goes further than just sorrow and brings the people of Canterbury to an understanding of the great drama that has happened to them. Starting from a vision of a desolated world, without God, the Priests modulate to a song of praise for another Saint in Canterbury. The Chorus joins in a hymn of thanksgiving for a man who has pointed out the failings of their world and the ever-renewing hope of redemption which makes the menacing animals of Part I not destructive forces but only part of life.

This blending of liturgy and drama is, then, the form of the play which Eliot regards as a "dead end" in his personal search for an effective verse drama. The writing of it had taught him, perhaps most important of all, how to transform the private voice of lyric poetry into the varied and

and individual idioms demanded by characters in a play. That the demands of characterization produce in Murder in the Cathedral only one individual, Becket, and several groups is of minor importance in the tracing of form, for there is great variation among, if not within, those groups; there is, in fact, more variation there than among characters in and of the later plays in the area of idiom and metric patterns. The individualization is achieved in Murder in the Cathedral through modulations in the lengths of verse lines and varyingly obvious presence of a caesura, through heavy or light use of internal and end rhymes, through a reliance on imagery contrasted with the most hackneyed speech, through a diversity of metre and, twice, the use of prose.

But these devices tend to create a very formal drama in which verse patterns are extremely noticeable for themselves, and it is this very formality that seems to put Murder in the Cathedral in disfavor with its author. The ceremonial, liturgical quality which results from alliteration and rhyme, as well as from the choral convention, is eminently suitable to a period play dealing with martyrdom but not, Eliot feels, for drama whose characters, situations and themes are of the twentieth century.

Thus, one of the primary problems which Eliot sets out to solve in his next play is the creation of a versification that would work for all themes and for all utterances of all characters. This would mean, apparently, that all persons must speak in the same basic metre, which would be flexible

enough to fit any idiom, any emotion. Any individualizing variation in use of rhyme, in flow of lines, in rhythms of speech would have to be abandoned. Since another stated goal was to avoid completely any use of prose, one would expect the basic versification in the later plays to be rather prosaic at times; it must stretch to include both those intense emotions which can be expressed only in verse and the very ordinary terms of polite conversation, as well as all the levels of expression that come between. Poetry that is forced to such elasticity runs the risk of becoming not poetry at all,²⁰ and the late plays show Eliot falling into his own trap as they raise doubts whether they are verse at all.

The other major problem which Eliot set up for himself to work out in the plays after Murder in the Cathedral was to eliminate the chorus. Avoidance of such a convention seems inconsistent in one who preaches the need for convention in contemporary art, but Eliot seems to want to limit convention in his own dramas to the fact of versification alone. However, he was not to achieve independence of a chorus so easily, as the second play, The Family Reunion, makes use of a "half chorus" which is even more conspicuous than the traditional chorus of the first play. He adds to this the lyric duets and a number of trance-like speeches that formalize the play even further.

It is in The Family Reunion, then, that Eliot can most

²⁰ See Appendix B.

clearly be seen struggling to create a workable verse drama. Whereas its conventions are more striking than those of Murder in the Cathedral, it is also obviously an attempt to adapt verse drama to twentieth century needs. It is, at the same time, both a clinging to and a rejection of formal patterns and obvious poetry. It serves as a transition between the traditions of Murder in the Cathedral and the starkness of the late plays.

II. TRANSITION: THE FAMILY REUNION

Although his first play was a success and remains, for many, the work by which Eliot is known as a dramatist, the poet himself was not convinced that he had achieved with Murder in the Cathedral a pattern which would work for modern verse drama as a whole. Its greatest limitation is that it presents historical personages, in dress of another age, taking part in an historical event; it is easy for an audience to accept verse dialogue from such persons as being "natural," because it hints at archaism. But if poetic drama is to capture a place as a legitimate form for contemporary theater -- a theater dominated by prose drama because modern man knows that he "speaks in prose" -- then it must present contemporary characters struggling with contemporary problems, characters from whom verse dialogue can be accepted, too, as "natural."

This is the problem, then, which Eliot set out to solve in his second drama, The Family Reunion, whose characters live in the Western society of the twentieth century and are concerned with matters which, if they remind one of the agonies of Greek drama, are also the agonies of contemporary living. This is not to say that Eliot abandoned all of the conventions which he employed in Murder in the Cathedral; he does, in fact, add several -- the appearance of the Eumenides, the trance-like "asides" of several characters, the dance movement of the final scene.

And he retained vestiges of the chorus. This is not the

full, Greek-tradition chorus of Murder in the Cathedral but is an occasional grouping of four minor characters: Ivy, Violet, Charles and Gerald, who speak in unison as representing the Family and individually as representing themselves. As Eliot points out in "Poetry and Drama" (p. 82), it is an unsatisfactory modification of the chorus, because in practical application it is a transition too difficult to ask of actors: to try to create a true character and then submerge him in a group to which he must surrender all individualizing traits. It is difficult for the audience, too, and makes them aware that what they are experiencing is not quite "real" and is very obviously poetry. There is justification for the device, of course; and, while one may not like or accept what is being done, one can nevertheless admire the ingenuity of the experiment. When the Family members speak in unison, they reveal themselves as basically alike -- embarrassed by the unusual, accustomed to think and speak in clichés only; the differences of personality revealed in their individual speeches are wiped out in the chorus and shown to be only surface qualities, while their emotions and intuitive reactions are identical.

The pattern for the chorus is fairly consistent in the five times it is used. The four members speak in unison for a number of lines, and then each is given a single line, with a return to unison speech to finish the choral episode. The chorus in the first scene of Part I is representative:

Why do we feel embarrassed, impatient, fretful,

ill at ease,
Assembled like amateur actors who have not
been assigned their parts?
Like amateur actors in a dream when the
curtain rises, to find themselves
dressed for a different play, or having
rehearsed the wrong parts,
Waiting for the rustling in the stalls, the
titter in the dress circle, the laughter
and catcalls in the gallery?
CHARLES: I might have been in St. Jame's Street,
in a comfortable chair rather nearer
the fire.
IVY: I might have been visiting Cousin Lily at
Sidmouth, if I had not come to this party.
GERALD: I might have been staying with Compton-
Smith, down at his place in Dorset.
VIOLET: I should have been helping Lady Bumpus,
at the Vicar's American Tea.
CHORUS: Yet here we are at Amy's command, to play
an unread part in some monstrous farce,
ridiculous in some nightmare pantomime.

From this sample, which is deviated from in the third chorus by the absence of the final choral lines and again in the last, which is all spoken in unison, one can easily see the pattern and purpose of the chorus as it is used in The Family Reunion. It combines the convention of the aside, since these lines are obviously verbalized thought rather than speech which is intended for communication among the actors on stage, with the traditional Greek function of the chorus: to allow for comment and interpretation by a group outside the action of the play. But it is a device that would work in one play only if, indeed, it works in that. It conventionalizes too much, formalizing the characters so much that they are destroyed as dramatic realities. It seems to have been Eliot's intention to blur these four characters in one another and he has succeeded somewhat, through the use of

the choral device, but he does not attempt it again in any of the later plays.

A further variation of the choral convention is also introduced in this play and not used again in any of the others. This is the lyric duet, further isolated even than the chorus by being in a different metric pattern from the rest of the play, consisting of obviously shorter lines.²¹ The two lyric duets, between Harry and Mary in Part I, scene ii, and between Harry and Agatha in Part II, scene 11, are "beyond character," spoken in a trance. Like operatic arias, they are remote from the dramatic action of the play and are set pieces which make the audience extremely conscious that they are poetry. One must conclude that, if Eliot's ideal for dramatic poetry is to create a form that will convey intense emotional experience without making the audience aware of verse for its own sake, this is a highly unsuccessful experiment that could not be dramatically justified.

The lyric duets are interesting as poetry, however, removed from any consideration of dramatic usefulness. Not many poets have created verse that not only speaks in terms of movement but also is movement. The Harry-Agatha duet is not so much poetry as it is a stately and ritualistic dance. It is also a useful example to demonstrate the difficulty of

²¹ Eliot designates these as two-stress lines, in contrast to the basic three stresses of the play. This scansion is open to doubt and will be discussed later in more detail.

scanning the line with only two stresses.

AGATHA: I only looked through the little door
When the sun was shining on the rose garden:
And heard in the distance tiny voices
And then a black raven flew over.
And then I was only my own feet walking
Away, down a concrete corridor
In a dead air. Only feet walking
And sharp heels scraping. Over and under
Echo and noise of feet.

I was only the feet, and the eye
Seeing the feet: the unwinking eye
Fixing the movement. Over and under.

HARRY: In and out, in an endless drift
Of shrieking forms in a circular desert
Weaving with contagion of putrescent embraces
On dissolving bone. In and out, the movement
Until the chain broke and I was left
Under the single eye above the desert.

AGATHA: Up and down, through the stone passages
Of an immense and empty hospital
Pervaded by a smell of disinfectant,
Looking straight ahead, passing barred windows.
Up and down. Until the chain breaks.

HARRY: To and fro, dragging my feet
Among inner shadows in the smoky wilderness
Trying to avoid the clasping branches
And the giant lizard. To and fro
Until the chain breaks.

The trance-like, incantatory effect of this passage, from which Agatha emerges asking, "What have I been saying?" is not limited to the lyric duets. It is characteristic of most of Agatha's speech, making her seem less a person than a benevolent household spirit who mixes the roles of teacher and of witch doctor. She is less often seen in conversation than in some strange rite of exorcism, such as that which ends Part I:

The eye is on this house
The eye covers it
There are three together
May the three be separated
May the knot that was tied

Become unknotted
May the crossed bones
In the filled-up well
Be at last straightened
May the weasel and the otter
Be about their proper business
The eye of the night time
Be diverted from this house
Till the knot is unknotted
The crossed is uncrossed
And the crooked is made straight.

After the choruses of the Family, after the lyric duets, after the ritualistic chants of Agatha, one is not surprised when the play closes with Agatha and her disciple, Mary, executing a ceremony for which Eliot gives the following directions:

Enter, from one door, AGATHA and MARY, and set a small portable table. From another door, enter DENMAN carrying a birthday cake with lighted candles, which she sets on the table. Exit DENMAN. AGATHA and MARY walk slowly in single file round and round the table, clockwise. At each revolution they blow out a few candles, so that their last words are spoken in the dark.

These devices -- the Family chorus, the lyric duets, the incantations and final ritual -- are aberrations from the "basic versification" of the play, the language of the dialogue. In "Poetry and Drama" (p. 82), Eliot describes the versification which he was trying to work out as one which is close to contemporary speech and in which the stresses could be made to come "wherever we should naturally put them, in uttering the particular phrase on the particular occasion." He defines the basic metre which he adopted for The Family Reunion and continued to use for the later plays as a line of varying length and varying number of syllables,

with three stresses divided by a caesura coming anywhere in the line. The line is not divided into feet but is scanned in the Old English tradition, according to the accented syllables; any number of light syllables may intervene between the three stresses, or two stresses may be placed together without intervening light syllables. The only rule is that the stressed syllables must be placed one on one side of the caesura and two on the other.

In theory this is a versification that is both strict enough to fulfill the need for convention and flexible enough to adapt to modern idiom. But a major problem arises when one attempts to scan the lines according to this pattern and finds that the three stresses allotted are too few for natural reading. Even making a conscious effort to avoid the tendency in English verse to give five stresses to the line and even rejecting the false imposition of regular feet, one cannot wrench the dialogue to fit the theoretical pattern which Eliot has set for it. The opening dialogue is given here as it would probably be scanned in a natural reading.²²

Not yet! I will ring for you./It is still quite light.
I have nothing to do/but watch the days draw out
Now that I sit in the house/from October to June,
And the swallow comes too soon/and the spring will
be over

²² Differentiation is made between the heavy accents probably intended by Eliot as the stresses (') and the lighter stresses of a natural reading (").

O Sun, that was once so warm/O Light that was taken
 for granted
 When I was young and strong/and sun and light un-
 sought for
 And clocks could be trusted/tomorrow assured
 And time would not stop in the dark!

This is a particularly interesting passage technically because it includes one line which so patently does not work and another which works very well in the metre assigned. The unsuccessful line, the sixth, is a beautifully balanced line which is equal on both sides of the caesura and would seem to call for the same number of stresses on either side of the break, rather than the one and two combination established by Eliot. It is impossible to decide which syllables should be given the allotted three accents. The ninth line, on the other hand, works perfectly and naturally. It can be given only three stresses and always three; there is no other way to read it. However, the position of the caesura in this line is uncertain.

So what is found, after all, in this play is a metre that is not consistent at all, though Eliot claims it is. Or, if forced to be consistent, it is a metric pattern that requires all characters to use of a heavily emphasized manner of speech. The normal light stresses must be ignored, while three syllables only may be sharply accented. The heavy rhythm resulting from such a reading of the lines is not suitable to the rather dreamy feeling of the lines quoted, nor

is it very close to the accents of contemporary speech. In The Family Reunion rhythm and meaning do not go together, particularly for the intense characters such as Amy, Agatha and Harry.

The rhythm works better for Violet and Ivy, who can be conceived of as that type of women who consistently speak in staccato, emphatic sentences. What they have to say, "polite" conversation as employed within the family circle, also fits better into such heavy rhythms:

I have always told Amy/she should go south in,
the winter.

Were I in Amy's position/I would go south in
the winter.

I would follow the sun/not wait for the sun to,
come here.

I would go south in the winter,/if I could afford
it.

But, again, it is difficult to imagine the men of the Family speaking in the heavily stressed rhythm.

If, then, one hears the lines as the strongly rhythmic units demanded by the versification, the effect is monotonous and obviously incapable of shading to fit the particular character. The people in this play very clearly do not all think or speak alike, just as the situations of the play do not all call for stressed, rhythmic speech; it is not dramatically or aesthetically right, then, to force everyone into identical speech patterns in order to satisfy the demands of a basic metre arbitrarily assigned to the play.

Though there are in The Family Reunion none of the var-

iations in rhythm, rhyme and alliteration which distinguish characters in Murder in the Cathedral, it is nevertheless apparent that the persons in the play are not all alike. Most obviously a unique character group, the four members of the Family who at times constitute a chorus speak on a very different level of awareness from the other major characters. Except when they are in chorus and there concerned with the sub-conscious and the emotional, Ivy, Violet, Gerald and Charles are spokesmen for the obvious and external only. They are so much alike -- as they must be in order for the reader to accept them in concert during the choral passages -- that one is never quite sure which of the men or which of the women is speaking at a given time. True, Ivy is a little more inane than her malicious, gossiping sister, and Charles is rather more quiet and, perhaps, more sensitive than the blustering, sporty Gerald; but these are only superficial variations on the basic dullness of all four.

At the other extreme of awareness are Harry and Agatha, who are so conscious of the internal that most of their dialogue is taken up with the theme of the impossibility of communication. As has already been pointed out, Agatha's speech has a definite incantatory quality, which is picked up in Harry's speech once he understands his mission and decides to pursue it. Before he reaches that point, however, his characteristic idiom fluctuates from the commonplaces of conversation to the trance-like soliloquies in which he tries to explain his experience:

...And now I know
That my business is not to run away but to pursue,
Not to avoid being found, but to seek.
I would not have chosen this way, had there
been any other!
It is at once the hardest thing, and the only
thing possible.
Now they will lead me. I shall be safe with them...

Downing, Harry's man, is interesting because he is a modern version of the Shakespearian fool, more perceptive

that his "superiors," who are in this case the Family, and yet a truly ordinary, vulgar figure in that he is a prototype of the trusted retainer. He is very much the servant and very British, and he is one of the most successful adaptations Eliot has achieved in stretching verse to fit contemporary speech. He is also the first evidence of Eliot's talent for comedy.

I understand you, Miss. And if I may say so,
Now that you've raised the subject, I'm most
relieved --
If you understand my meaning. I thought that
was the reason
We was off tonight. In fact, I half expected it,
So I had the car all ready. You mean them ghosts,
Miss!
I wondered when his Lordship would get around to
seeing them --
And so you've seen them too! They must have given
you a turn!
They did me, at first. You soon get used to them.
Of course, I knew they was to do with his Lordship,
And not with me, so I could see them cheerful-like,
In a manner of speaking. There's no harm in them,
I'll take my oath. Will that be all, Miss?

But of all the characters, those who are finally the most interesting are Amy and Charles. The latter draws attention because he does not quite fit into the generalizations one might make about the Family; by the end of the play, in fact, he is so much a misfit that one is uneasy to find him still included in the unison passages. More withdrawn and in-looking from the first, he gathers more and more unfaith as the reunion progresses; Harry's accusations that they are all only capable of the external experiences startle Charles out of his smug satisfaction with his cosy corner of the London club and reveal him as having the half-

awareness of a Prufrock. Whereas one is inclined to sneer, along with Harry, when Charles claims in Part I, scene ii, that he understands "these feelings better than you know," by the final scene one sympathizes and even identifies one-self with this man who is, after all, at about the same level of understanding as most of us.

...It's very odd,
But I am beginning to feel, just beginning to
 feel
That there is something I could understand, if
 I were told it.
But I'm not sure that I want to know. I suppose
 I'm getting old:
Old age came softly up to now. I felt safe enough;
And now I don't feel safe. As if the earth should
 open
Right to the centre, as I was about to cross Pall
 Mall.
I thought that life could bring no further surprises;
But I remember now, that I am always surprised
By the bull-dog in the Burlington Arcade.
What if every moment were like that, if one were
 awake?

So it is disconcerting to find him on the next page joining with the others in a choral commentary which reveals total lack of understanding. It is Charles who points up the greatest danger of a trick like that of the Family chorus, since he makes it ludicrous by growing beyond the others while still being forced by the poet to participate in their inanities.

Amy is an intriguing character for a different reason: because, although it is a rewriting of the Orestean theme, The Family Reunion is as much her play as Harry's. Hers is the most interesting idiom, for it combines the imagistic, ceremonial quality of Agatha's speech with a sharply practi-

cal wisdom that knows how to deal with life on its own level. In her language she is somewhere between the dream-like rituals of Agatha and the dull cliches of the Family; and, like Charles, she is understandable because she is not so terribly extreme as either of the levels between which she is balanced with her poetic-practical speech:

I do not want the clock to stop in the dark.
If you want to know why I never leave Wishwood
That is the reason. I keep Wishwood alive
To keep the family alive, to keep them together,
To keep me alive, and I live to keep them.
You non of you understand how old you are
And death will come to you as a mild surprise,
A momentary shudder in a vacant room.

The variety of characters who can demand attention in The Family Reunion is perhaps one measure of the progress Eliot had made in writing verse drama. In Murder in the Cathedral he created one truly full character, Thomas, and surrounded him with groups whose members were undistinguished enough so that they were not given names. In this second play he has created at least five persons -- Harry, Agatha, Mary, Amy and Charles -- who are believable and reasonably full-drawn characters. He can no longer be accused of writing dramatic monologue rather than drama.

But the question of whose play this is, whether it is the triumph of Harry or the tragedy of his mother, is an indication of a serious flaw, one which Eliot noted in "Poetry and Drama" (p. 84). It could be assumed that The Family Reunion, because it is so obviously an adaptation of the Orestean legend, is the drama of the son's salvation and the

lifting of a curse from the house. Yet sympathy tends to rest with Amy, whose tragedy it is to have lost "what I never had..."; even Eliot admits that his sympathies are now with her rather than with the prig, her son.

Another result of the failure of adjustment between the Greek legend and the modern situation is the awkwardness of the Eumenides in Eliot's play. They are listed in the cast of characters, but the problem is how to represent them on stage. In "Poetry and Drama" (p. 84), Eliot records that:

...We tried every possible manner of presenting them. We put them on the stage, and they looked like uninvited guests who had strayed in from a fancy dress ball. We concealed them behind guaze, and they suggested a still out a Walt Disney film. We made them dimmer, and they looked like shrubbery just outside the window. I have seen other expedients tried: I have seen them signalling from across the garden, or swarming on stage like a football team, and they are never right. They never succeed in being either Greek goddesses or modern spooks.

The decision made about them is that they must be omitted from the cast and understood to be visible only to certain characters but not to the audience. It may be supposed that this would work; it is apparently the same sort of staging used by Sartre for his Furies. With the Eumenides not visible, however, the audience must be depended upon for enough "suspension of disbelief" to accept them as existing rather than only as figments of Harry's insane imagination. They force the poet, then, into dependence upon yet another convention.

It is, perhaps, just this wealth of conventions which

are completely unfamiliar to a modern, prose-conditioned audience that gives The Family Reunion its feeling of distance. A Greek theme serves to remove the audience from contemporaneity by reminding them of ancient legend. A semi-chorus reenforces that removal; the trance-like lyric duets and Agatha's incantations, culminating in the final dance, extend the chorus tradition so far beyond the experience of the audience that they serve mostly as a reminder that the characters are talking in verse. Added to these distancing devices is the failure to create very real characters, with the exception of Downing, Amy and Charles.

The final result, then, is an uneasy suspicion that what is happening on stage is not a drama so much as it is a formal minuet, performed by dancers under a narcotic. The struggle does not seem quite real, because it is so formalized that the audience is barred from identification with it. Yet, although its distance makes it a play without much power to move, The Family Reunion is intensely interesting for its experiments with form, experiments discarded before the last plays. It is a transition, showing Eliot in the process of shedding the formalities of Murder in the Cathedral but not yet arrived at the starkness of the later plays, and turning from tragedy to the drawing-room comedies, The Cocktail Party and The Confidential Clerk.

III, THE COMEDIES

Feeling that he had solved the largest problem of all, that of creating a basic versification for poetic drama, Eliot moved into the field of drawing-room comedy with The Cocktail Party and The Confidential Clerk. In these plays he abandons the chorus completely, except for vestigial traces in the libation scene of The Cocktail Party, and makes no further use of ghosts; he does retain a certain dependence on the Greek themes which are the ordering force on modern chaos -- for the first play, the Alcestis, and for the second, the Ion, of Euripides -- but the dependence is so disguised and the themes so modified that they were not recognized generally until Eliot pointed them out.

The largest difference between these two plays and their predecessors is, of course, the turn from tragedy to what is primarily comedy, although it must be admitted that the serious probings of life are still there under the surface of wit. The first advantage resulting from the move to comedy is that the basic versification which seems so unsuitable and unworkable for the lyric, dream-like statements of a tragedy like The Family Reunion now works surprisingly well for the brisk dialogue of comedy's conversations. The lines themselves, still the arbitrarily determined three-stress units broken by a caesura, are for the most part composed of fewer syllables, so that the limitation to three heavy accents works more naturally. There is also a quality to the dialogue of comedy which accepts gracefully the emphasized

speech resulting from Eliot's metre. The increased suitability of the invented versification to comedy is immediately apparent from the opening speech of The Cocktail Party:

ALEX: You've missed the point completely. Julia:

There were no tigers. That was the point.

JULIA: Then what were you doing, up in a tree:

You and the Maharaja?

ALEX: My dear Julia!

It's perfectly hopeless. You haven't been listening.

It is also immediately apparent, however, that this just does not sound like verse at all. There is a faint metronomic beat -- which actors in the performing of the plays would do their best to conceal -- but there are none of the "trimmings" which one expects of poetry. No longer does Eliot resort to even occasional rhyme, and alliteration and assonance have also disappeared. There are, if one searches diligently enough, a few passages which gain a chanting effect from the repetition of certain words, as in Act I, scene i, of the earlier play:

I know you as well as I know your wife;
And I knew that all you wanted was the luxury
Of an intimate disclosure to a stranger.
Let me, therefore, remain the stranger.
But let me tell you, that to approach the stranger
Is to invite the unexpected...

Even the very slight feeling of rhyme which this passage gives is, however, missing the next time a similar play on words is made, this time by Edward in the same scene:

That is the worst moment, when you feel that
you have lost
The desire for all that was most desirable,
And before you are contented with what you
can desire;
And you go on wishing that you could desire
What desire has left behind...

In The Confidential Clerk such devices are abandoned completely, and a search for even the slightest hint of rhyme is unrewarded.

The disappointments of the new versification are sharper than ever when the plays move from the purely comic level to the moments of intense emotion, which Eliot has claimed demand poetical expression. When Edward attempts to express his sense of isolation, his denial of a love affair with Celia, he comes the closest of any character in the two plays to imagery; he uses the objective correlative reminiscent of the rose gardens of The Family Reunion and Four Quartets:

...There was a door
And I could not open it. I could not touch
the handle.
Why could I not walk out of my prison?
What is hell? Hell is oneself...

And if one cannot expect poetry from a comic-tragic figure such as Edward, one certainly looks for it from Celia, the only completely tragic character of the play. Again, one is disappointed; when she attempts to describe her sense of sin in Act II, she brings forth only intellectualized statements of emotion, not emotion itself:

It's not the feeling of anything I've ever done,
Which I might get away from, or of anything in me
I could get rid of -- but of emptiness, of failure
Towards someone, or something, outside of myself;
And I feel I must...atone -- is that the word?

The disappointment of such anti-poetry is even more deeply felt in The Confidential Clerk, where there is not even the wittiness of the earlier play to compensate for the loss of poetry. Only in the sensitive second act, in the conversation

between Colby and Lucasta, does the verse rise to undisputed poetry; the passage is so unexpected, surrounded as it is with very dull dialogue in very uninspired language, that one can ignore the fact that the objective correlative is a stock one for Eliot -- the rose garden and hospital-prison again, seemingly the only terms in which Eliot can now express the feelings of isolation and the impossibility of communication:

COLBY: It can't be done by issuing invitations:
They would just have to come. And I should not
see them coming.
I would not hear the opening of the gate.
They would simply...be there suddenly,
Unexpectedly. Walking down an alley
I should become aware of someone walking with me.
LUCASTA: How afraid one is of...being hurt!
COLBY: It's not the hurting that one would mind
But the sense of desolation afterwards.
LUCASTA: I know what you mean. Then the flowers
would fade
And the music would stop. And the walls would
be broken.
And you would find yourself in a devastated area -
A bomb-site...willow herb...a dirty public square.²³

One snatches at such a stray flicker of poetry in the two comedies, for there is little in the verse that fires the spirit. It must be admitted, however, that the versification is fluent and colloquial and seems an adequate vehicle for the idiom of modern speech. A very ordinary conversation between Lavinia and Edward in Act II, scene iii, of The Cocktail Party gives no hint that it is verse or even the artificial speech of the stage, for that matter:

²³ Citations from The Confidential Clerk are to the Harcourt, Brace and Company edition, (New York, 1954).

EDWARD: I was unaware that you'd always given in
to me.
It struck me very differently. As we're on the
subject,
I thought that it was I who had given in to you.
LAVINIA: I know what you mean by giving in to me:
You mean, leaving all the practical decisions
That you should have made yourself. I remember --
Oh, I ought to have realised what was coming --
When we were planning our honeymoon,
I couldn't make you say where you wanted to go...

The versification also works when one of the characters is
involved on a poetic level of speech and the other on a banal
level, as in the conversation of Edward and Lavinia a few
lines later:

LAVINIA: You're complicating what is in fact
very simple.
But there is one point which I see clearly:
We are not to relapse into the kind of life
we led
Until yesterday morning.
EDWARD: There was a door
And I could not open it. I could not touch
the handle.
What is hell? Hell is oneself,
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections...
LAVINIA: Edward, what are you talking about?
Talking to yourself. Could you bear, for a
moment,
To think of me?
EDWARD: It was only yesterday
That damnation took place...

Lavinia has given a hint of the major difficulty which arises
when the attempt is made to combine the two levels: the char-
acter who is talking poetic language seems to be in a trance,
talking to himself like the characters in The Family Reunion.

The formal devices of that play are, however, abandoned
in the comedies, except for such inadvertent trances as that
cited and, in The Cocktail Party, a few traces of ritual. The

most obvious of the rituals is, of course, the libation scene at the end of Act II, in which the three guardians, Alex, Julia and Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, bless the two "ways" in a ceremony reminiscent of the birthday cake ceremony of The Family Reunion. But this obvious ritual is not the only one in the play. Throughout the first scene there is a repeated exchange between the Unidentified Guest and Edward which, while it serves a comic purpose, is also something of a rite:

EDWARD: ...Or would you rather have whiskey?
UNIDENTIFIED GUEST: Gin.
EDWARD: Anything in it?
U.G.: A drop of water.

This is repeated a few lines later, after Edward has announced that his wife has left him:

U.G.: ...This is an occasion.
May I take another drink?
EDWARD: Whiskey?
U.G.: Gin.
EDWARD: Anything with it?
U.G.: Nothing but water.

and again:

EDWARD: ...What were you drinking?
Whiskey?
U.G.: Gin.
EDWARD: Anything with it?
U.G.: Water.

After this third ritual, each of which seems to mark off a significant advance in Edward's understanding of his situation, the ceremony is dropped, to be picked up in the last scene of the play:

EDWARD: And will you have a cocktail?
REILLY: Might I have a glass of water?

EDWARD: Anything with it?

REILLY: Nothing, thank you.

This last time, however, the exchange seems to have significance only as comedy or as a reminder of the early scene. for the other appearances of the ritual the Unidentified Guest has given specific directions on the preparation and consumption of the gin and water, with a care that makes one suspect the rite of being more than it seems on the surface:

Let me prepare it for you, if I may...

Strong...but sip it slowly... and drink it sitting
down.

Breathe deeply, and adopt a relaxed position.

What the significance of the ritual might be is obscure; it could be part of the ceremony of the unidentified, supposed religious society in which Alex, Julia and Reilly are workers -- a ritual which, like yoga, enables one to seek absolute calm.

There is no parallel to this ritual in The Confidential Clerk, unless it is the repetition, in Acts II and III, of the name of Mrs. Guzzard of Teddington. This repetition takes on the appearance of an invocation of a good spirit who would come to straighten our human entanglements -- as Mrs. Guzzard eventually does. But for the most part Eliot has freed his plays of dependence on ritual, whether expressed through choruses or ceremonies.

There is, even in Eliot's comedies, a level of meaning which can not be fitted into the basic idioms of the plays, and he substitutes for the chorus of the first two plays the Guardians in The Cocktail Party and Mrs. Guzzard in The

Confidential Clerk. Not only do they comment on the emotional progress of the plays, but they also help to bring about that progress in the other characters; they are descendents of Agatha. The Guardians hover over the characters of The Cocktail Party, not only managing their destinies through Reilly but also helping to provide the small necessities of life, as Alex attempts to do in cooking dinner for Edward. Eventually everyone in the play becomes a "guardian" of sorts, sharing the management of Peter Quilpe's destiny in the final act.

In The Confidential Clerk the omniscient duties fall on Mrs. Guzzard. She is an interesting variation on the Guardians because, although her language is very ordinary, she seems to be aware of her position of power over the destinies of the characters. While she refrains from pouring libations or dancing around a cake, she is given to cryptic statements that reveal her as supra-human. She forces decisions and grants wishes in the last act with the aplomb of a fairy godmother:

You wished for your son, and now you have your
son.

We all of us have to adapt ourselves
To the wish that is granted...

Later, to Colby:

You shall have your wish. And when you have
your wish
You will have to come to terms with it. You
shall have a father
Dead, and unknown to you...

And, finally, after establishing all the true relationships:

Then I will say good-bye. You have all had
In one form or another. You and I, Sir Claude,
Had our wishes twenty-five years ago;
But we failed to observe, when we had our wishes,
That there was a time-limit clause in the contract.

After this, one expects her to dissolve into the atmosphere in the traditional manner of spirits, but she seems to leave in a more conventional way. She is the priestess of Delphi, speaking in the manner of middle-class England. As a member of the omniscient group of Eliot's characters, she is unique because she shares the idiom of the ordinary, mortal characters.

This sharing of one idiom is not a problem in The Confidential Clerk, but is, perhaps, a strength instead. The action and language of the play is consistently banal and unexciting (perhaps purposely), with the exception of the conversation between Colby and Lucasta. There is one level only to the play, and that is a level midway between deep tragedy and high comedy. This tone is not one of brooding, as in Murder in the Cathedral, nor is it ever one of bright wit, as in the first act of The Cocktail Party; instead, it is one which consistently "plays down" the importance of any action, seldom provoking a laugh but never calling for a tear, either. It is a melodrama with an uneasy foundation of gravity, which Eliot cannot seem to either escape or fuse with the rest of the play and, since its theme is again the choosing of a way of life, adds little to what has already been said in the previous plays.

The disparity between the two levels of meaning in the play is not very important, really, because one is unaware of the deeper problems for most of the drama. The first act presents rather stock characters: a stuffy knight with a hidden passion for art in the form of pottery; his wife, who dabbles in the various streams of occultism; his confidential clerks, old and new -- the first a middle-class Englishman who has retired to putter around his suburban garden, the second a shy, quiet and rather cold young man; a flighty young woman, suspected of being Sir Claude's mistress; and her fiance, another rather stuffy, though younger, man in the City. The second act, however, brightens the play, as Lucasta and Colby bring up such issues as music and craftsmanship, loneliness, secret gardens and God; but these are either ignored or perfunctorily wound up as the play moves on about its business of straightening out parental ties. From a stirring and interesting second act, the play descends again into the level of melodrama, with only a hint of the deeper meanings to keep an audience involved in the action.

This concern with who fathered whom is, of course, a variation on the Eliot theme of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, a theme of all the plays on a basic level. As Edward and Lavinia in The Cocktail Party were guided to "choose" one way of life and Celia another, so Colby in this must solve the problem of parentage differently from Lucasta's way or B. Kaghan's -- or Sir Claude's. He makes a different compromise with his limited craftsmanship than had Sir Claude;

he accepts his true father's way of life. And it is the surprising suffling of parents that has given Colby the freedom to make his choice -- this seems to be the deeper meaning behind the devices of melodrama which, when they occupy the entire third act, seem silly and inconsequential in contrast to the sensitivity of Act II.

But the problem of unity of the various levels is more complex and more serious in The Cocktail Party, which fluctuates sharply between the poles of hilarious wit and tragic gravity. How is it possible to reconcile the high comedy and almost slapstick tone of Act I with the crucifixion in Act III? And if one succeeds at that reconciliation, there remains the even more difficult problem of the fusing of those two levels within each character, particularly within the Guardians. Is Julia to be taken as a meddling old woman, the prototype of the eccentric dowager, or as the compassionate but determined disciple of the Society? Is Alex the laughable civil servant who mismanages native problems and produces inedible messes in the kitchen, or is he the missionary who reports Celia's crucifixion? And, most difficult of all, is Harcourt-Reilly the half-drunk guest at the cocktail party or the favorite psychiatrist of fashionable London or the dedicated prophet who blesses with the last words of Buddha: "Work out your salvation with diligence..."?

There is precedence for the dual character of Reilly, in the *Alcestis* of Euripides on which Eliot has based his play. In that play Heracles sings and dances in the house

where death has struck, unaware of the state of mourning. Reilly's situation in The Cocktail Party is only superficially the same, however; he is the semi-deity who will restore the lost wife, but he is also not only aware of her absence but is the cause of it. The example of the classical play, then, does not seem justification enough for the comic-serious role which Reilly is made to play. The fusion of the two levels in Reilly and the other Guardians makes each statement dismayingly ambiguous. When Julia, preparing to tell a story of the Vincewell wedding, says:

Yes, Tony was the product, but not the solution.
He only made the situation more difficult...

it seems to be just a witty comment. In the light of the theme of the play, it gains gravity as a variation on the situation of Edward and Lavinia. And even the most experienced actor would find it a difficult decision as to whether the following lines of the Unidentified Guest should be given as comedy or played "straight:"

Then no doubt it's all for the best.
With another man, she might have made a mistake
And want to come back to you. If another woman,
She might decide to be forgiving
And gain an advantage. If there's no other woman
And no other man, then the reason may be deeper
And you've ground for hope that she won't come
back at all.

After the first act, however, such ambiguity is really no longer a problem, for -- aside from the stock comedy situation of unexpected encounters of certain characters -- the second act is entirely serious up to the final statement by Alex: "You know, I have connections -- even in California."

This is not only a perfect curtain line, but is also an example of ambiguity working amazingly well; it is brightly comic and a welcome relief after the libation, and it is deeply true for Alex as a member of the religious Society. The third act, then, establishes itself in an uneasy middle ground, prophetic of the tone of The Confidential Clerk; it does not again rise to high wit, even in the conversations of Julia and Alex, which were so funny in the first act. (The audience is suspicious of even the most witty of comments from these characters by now, since they have been revealed as very serious persons.) The third act does, however, contain most of the deep seriousness of the play, most particularly the news of Celia's crucifixion. It also contains the most definite bit of poetry as such, ironically, it is not Eliot's, but a passage quoted from Shelley. Its obvious poetry is extremely noticeable, coming as it does in the midst of prose-like versification.

What emerges as the basic problem of the two plays, finally, is the rift between the two levels and the question of which is to dominate. Much of The Cocktail Party can be enjoyed for its wit alone, without bothering with the deeper significances; The Confidential Clerk, on the other hand, is not witty enough to stand as entertainment for its own sake. The purpose of the plays is apparently not to move, as Murder in the Cathedral was moving; what is left for them to do, in the traditional distinction between tragedy and comedy, is inspire thought. In this purpose The Cocktail Party succeeds,

because its issues are clearly drawn. The Confidential Clerk does not, because the problems it solves are not those which interest the auditors; those issues are ignored after Act II.

The two plays, both presented for the first time at the Edinburgh Festivals with outstanding casts, have been the most successful of Eliot's plays, despite the flaws pointed out here. They have in their favor the fact that they are comedies and thus generally more popular than would be tragedies. They provide an ironic satisfaction in that they are verse dramas but sound like prose. And they are stronger as theater, perhaps, than the predecessors; Eliot has progressed in the field of dramatic conventions so far as to provide three strong acts with adequate action in each, rather than two "parts," the second of them dangerously near an epilogue.

But the very "improvements" which made the plays popular successes deny them undisputed recognition as verse dramas. To the reader concerned with form, the plays seem formless, between two conventions. To the reader concerned with verse, the plays seem to be prose. And to the reader wishing to be stirred, the plays seem empty and disappointing. Perhaps Eliot realized the problem of fusion of the two planes of reality in his use of the comedy form; for in his last play, The Elder Statesman, although he retains the same basic versification, he returns to a serious level in surface form as well as meaning.

IV. THE FINAL SHAPE

It is difficult to assign The Elder Statesman to any specific "type" of drama. Eliot has announced that the play has as its base Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus; in adhering to its model, then, Eliot's play must be a serious play with a "happy" solution and, generally, this is its tone. The theme, too, of a man near death facing the "ghosts" of the past, is close to the Greek model. However, The Elder Statesman has touches of comedy that are not found in Sophocles' play; there are, occasionally, ludicrous speeches and one or two bits of "stage business"²⁴ that seem out of place in a serious drama.

The play seems characterized most of all by a sense of irony; irony found in the attitude of the playwright who is using a sort of drama which aspires neither to high comedy nor tragedy to carry the themes of self-knowledge, isolation and loneliness, confession and contrition, and irony within the play itself, from the characters who treat essentially melodramatic situations with upper-middle-class British imperturbability. The situations, too, are essentially ironic, in that they are a disquieting combination of the melodramatic (two figures come out of the past of the elder statesman to extract a perverted form of blackmail) and the tragic (a retired statesman forced to face a life of failure as husband, father, friend and lover).

²⁴ For example, the whiskey and ice episode in Act I.

Eliot seems well aware of how striking such poetic passages are in the general texture of the play, for he puts his characters in a trance-like state in order to speak them; Monica and Charles "wake up" when Lambert interrupts this scene with the tea trolley, and they do not indulge in poetry again. Their next love scene, at the opening of Act

²⁵ Citations from The Elder Statesman are to the edition by Faber and Faber Limited, (London, 1959).

III, is as stilted as the majority of such scenes on stage.

Something approaching poetry is discovered again in
Act II, again from Monica and again very brief:

...But there's no vocabulary
For love within a family, love that's lived in
But not looked at, love within the light of which
All else is seen, the love within which
All other love finds speech.
This love is silent...

The rest of the play, empty of imagery and even of poetic
rhythms, fluctuates between banal conversation and philo-
sophical monologues from the elder statesman, Lord Claver-
ton.

These philosophical monologues are concerned with the
various themes of the play, all of which are part of Lord
Claverton's movement toward knowledge of self. Monica pre-
pares for the monologues and for the entrance of Lord Cla-
verton by pointing out three characteristics of the man and
his present situation: he has a terror of being alone, he
fears being exposed to strangers, and he has only a short
time left to live. Then the elder statesman begins to pre-
sent the fuller investigation of these matters. One of the
major concerns is with success or failure -- as a statesman:

...Say, rather, the exequies
Of the failed successes, the successful failures.
Who occupy positions that other men covet.
When we go, a good many folk are mildly grieved.
And our close associates, the small minority
Of those who really understand the place we
filled,
Are inwardly delighted...

as a friend and lover:

...They were people with good in them,
People who might have been very different
From Gomez, Mrs. Carghill and Lord Claverton.
Freddy admired me, when we were at Oxford;
What did I make of his admiration?
I led him to acquire tastes beyond his means
So he became a forger. And so he served his term.
Was I responsible for that weakness in him?
Yes, I was...
And Maisies loved me, with whatever capacity
For loving she had -- self-centred and foolish --
But we should respect love always when we meet it;
Even when it's vain and selfish, we must not abuse
it.

as a husband:

And I know
That I never knew your mother, as she never knew
me.
...How open one's heart
When one is sure of the wrong response.
How make a confession with no hope of absolution?
It was not her fault...

and as a father:

It's impossible to be quite honest with your
child
If you've never been honest with anyone older,
On terms of equality...

All these investigations of his own failure, while pretending
success, lead Lord Claverton to a confession of his past
sins and, with that confession, complete self-knowledge which
in turn reveals to him what true love is; he has turned the
haunting "ghosts" of the past into symbols of absolved sin,
if not into the benevolent spirits of The Family Reunion.

It is interesting that in this play the suffering cen-
tral figure is able to work out his own salvation, without
the aid of Guardians or Mrs. Guzzard. There are, to be sure,
ghosts in much the same role as the Eumenides of Orestean
tradition, first threatening, but finally only guideposts to

salvation. But these ghosts do not raise the problems of Harry's Eumenides, since they are obviously human realities whose symbolic existence in Lord Claverton's memory has haunted him. He refers to them as ghosts, and seems to realize them more as ghosts than as human beings, because they have come to be symbols rather than actualities for him:

Because they are not real, Charles. They are
merely ghosts:
Spectres from my past. They've always been
with me
Though it was not till lately that I found the
living persons
Whose ghosts tormented me, to be only human
beings,
Malicious, petty, and I see myself emerging
From my spectral existence into something
like reality.

To the audience they are people; to Lord Claverton, both people and ghosts. This seems an ingenious and workable solution to the problem which faced Eliot in The Family Reunion, for here the representatives of certain sins are characters in their own right.

Although these "ghosts" help to speed the elder statesman's realization of the need for confession -- or, like Thomas a Becket's Tempters, visibly dramatize that realization -- he has been moving toward that realization by himself. He has seen the remnant of life left him as a vacuum of inaction:

It's just like sitting in an empty waiting room
In a railway station on a branch line,
After the last train, after all the other pas-
sengers
Have left, and the booking office is closed
And the porters have gone...

From this sense of emptiness it is a logical movement, for a character of intelligence and sensitivity, to a religious solution: the confession of guilt and the peace that comes with the act of contrition:

This may surprise you: I feel at peace now.
It is the peace that ensues upon contrition
When contrition ensues upon knowledge of the
truth.
Why did I always want to dominate my children?
Why did I mark out a narrow path for Michael?
Because I wanted to perpetuate myself in him.
Why did I want to keep you to myself, Monica?
Because I wanted you to give your life to adoring
That man I pretended to myself that I was,
So that I could believe in my own pretences.
I've only just now had the illumination
Of knowing what love is. We all think we know,
But how few of us do! And now I feel happy --
In spite of everything, in defiance of reason,
I have been brushed by the wing of happiness...

Perhaps partly because he is able, like Thomas, to work out his own solution to life and death, and because he has almost all the important dramatic speeches of the play, the elder statesman stands out from the other characters as the only real and fully individualized person of the drama. Gomez, although he is a recognizable parallel to Sophocles' Creon, remains a type of the exiled opportunist who takes advantage of the unrest of Latin American politics; Mrs. Carghill is a type of the now-respectable but still vulgar ex-musical comedy star; Monica and Charles, except for their first act lyricism are rather standard young lovers, unless one feels compelled to interpret Monica as the Antigone figure; Michael, the Polyneices of the legendary base, is a typical rebellious son of a famous father. Even the minor

character, Mrs. Piggot, is a stock character -- the busy-body matron of a convalescent home.

But Lord Claverton, both as a parallel to the aged Oedipus and as a retired English statesman, is real, with all his pomposity as well as his ultimate arrival at self-knowledge. In this aspect the play seems almost a reversion to *Murder in the Cathedral*, another drama in which the central figure, surrounded by advisers to the wrong way, works out his own peace. Indeed, the play as a whole seems more a reversion than a step beyond and in the same direction as the comedies. While it remains a play whose intention is more to move to thought than to inspire to emotion, it nevertheless avoids the split between the two levels of meaning, the purely comic and the deeply serious. No character is as profound as Becket or as agonized as Harry, but neither is any made to waver between comedy and omniscience, as is Reilly of The Cocktail Party; Lord Claverton reaches self-knowledge in a careful and unemotional manner, on a subdued level which is believable once one accepts the convention of British stoicism.

There is also some slight return to formalism or ritual, with the "lyric duet" of Monica and Charles in Act I resembling somewhat the duets of The Family Reunion. There is, too, a sister to the libation and the birthday-cake dance in the final "charm" which Monica speaks at the close of the play:

Age and decrepitude can have no terror for me,

Loss and vicissitude cannot appall me,
Not even death can dismay or amaze me
Fixed in the eternity of love unchanging.

One cannot say, however, that Eliot has finally achieved the perfect form, for there is much in this play that is disappointing. The versification still seems like prose rather than poetry, and the bits of ritual and poetry flung here and there through the play are still very noticeable in their contrast to the general dullness of the language. The entire play seems muted, not only in language but also in tone and does not seem capable of rising to poetry in even those rare moments of intense emotion.

But Eliot seems finally at home in the form. The problems of purely dramatic nature have been worked out: there is enough action in the play to satisfy an audience, and there is a nice balance in the three acts: background and the first presentation of the problem in Act I, complications of the action in Act II, a climax and solution in Act III, with a strong curtain and no possibility that it can be termed an epilogue rather than an act. With such problems of dramatic form solved, the only thing now to be wished is a recapturing of the old excitement of poetry created by a master of the craft.

This tracing of Eliot's evolution of form for modern verse drama is, then, complete to date, and the pattern of that evolution can be seen to be direct, though not completely satisfactory in the product. The beginning was in litur-

gical drama, in a morality play of temptation; the shape of it was formal, and the effect was one of intensity and significance. For many admirers of Eliot, that first drama, Murder in the Cathedral, stands as the best of his plays, as the only lasting masterpiece among them. Regardless of any other reasons suggested for its lasting effect, one must take into account the brilliance and variety of the poetry of the play; it reveals Eliot at the peak of his genius, master of the techniques of rhyme and rhythm.

The use of the device of the chorus, which Eliot soon abandoned on the ground that a chorus is needed only to cover a poet's dramatic weaknesses, is particularly effective in that first play. The Women of Centerbury watch and suffer and comment on the action of the drama, mediating between the play and its audience and intensifying the action by demonstrating its effect on themselves. In their speeches, as in those of the other characters, the possibilities of rhyme -- alliterative, internal and end -- and of imagery are explored to their fullest.

Individual actors in that play are characterized by the verse they speak, so that there is obvious difference between the lilting cadences of the First Tempter, luring by the memory of old pleasures, and the bluntness and force of those who tempt by power. Even more striking is the difference between all these, users of the Anglo-Saxon poetic devices (alliteration, the caesura, two- and four-stress lines), and the beautifully formal, dignified, rhymed versification

of Becket's speeches. Given these distinctive variations in rhythm and rhyme patterns, one needs no other indication of who is speaking.

Eliot found the largest flaw of the first play to be its lack of contemporaneity, particularly if it was intended as a vehicle to restore verse drama to a place beside the dominant prose drama of today. Dealing with an historical personage, and a saint at that, Murder in the Cathedral did not seem to be obviously applicable to the problems of the twentieth century. And this was the "error" which Eliot set about to correct in the second play, The Family Reunion.

The second play is far different from the first; it is a play pointing in two directions: back to the formality of its predecessors and beyond, to the Greek drama, and forward to the drawing-room comedies of contemporary setting. The Family Reunion takes the characters of drawing-room comedy and puts them in conflict with an Orestean hero; it takes the situation of a family gathering and makes it the climax of a search for self-knowledge. And it takes the idiom of contemporary speech, fits it into a strict (though doubtful) verse pattern, and contrasts it with the formal devices of a chorus, lyric duets and liturgical chants and dances. Too wierd to be understood or accepted readily by an audience, it was not a theatrical success. Nor, although its form is interesting, it it a success as literature.

Its flaws are obvious. The blending of the Orestean theme, with its pursuing Eumenides and pursued here, and

the contemporary setting is unsuccessful. The inferiority for dramatic purposes of Harry's story to that of Orestes is manifest, since the hatred of a wife, though repeated in two generations, does not, as Eliot handles it, assume more than private significance. And the modern "ghosts" are not as workable as the Furies of Greek drama; they are only awkward representatives of a forgotten tradition, no longer meaningful to a modern audience unless clearly presented.

The change in versification is also less than successful, for two reasons. The first is that the pattern as Eliot describes it -- three-stress lines of any length, with a caesura -- is not the pattern found in scanning the play. The second reason is that the verse has a deliberate flatness which sounds hardly distinguishable from prose; in this effort to approximate colloquial speech Eliot seems to have forgotten his earlier principle that verse is demanded by heightened emotion and that whatever can now be said just as well in prose is better said in prose.

The exceptions to that flatness -- the choruses of the Family, the lyric duets, and the final incantation and dance around the birthday cake -- create further problems, for they give the action a formality that makes it seem very distant from anything which might concern the auditor. The drawing-room comedies do not continue that problem; the action is flat throughout, to match the flatness of the speech. The ritual of libation in The Cocktail Party is accepted as such by its participants; it is not a device seemingly natural to

the characters performing it and ceremonial only in the eyes of the audience, but is shared by all as a rite.

There is, however, just as serious a potential rift in the comic dramas as in their predecessors: the rift between the two planes of reality, the comic and the religio-serious. This rift is healed in the final play, in which everything takes place on a middle ground between comedy and tragedy.

The versification of the last three plays is the same, so one can assume that Eliot is satisfied that he has achieved what he set out to do: create a form that will work for modern verse drama. In one sense he has succeeded, since his plays are received with public and critical acclaim. They are, certainly, as any work by so influential a poet must be, important in the large view of literature.

But in another sense, Eliot has failed in finding a form for verse drama that would restore it as a challenger to the dominance of prose theater. For, in working out a form acceptable to the public, he has abandoned poetry; his plays are verse drama without verse. While it is admitted that, to qualify as poetry, verse need not have rhyme or any of the other sound devices employed before the advent of "free" verse, it is also admitted that verse must have something to distinguish it from rhythmic prose, and that something is usually imagery or its equivalent. And that is exactly what is missing from Eliot's later plays. Even in the midst of intense emotion, in those speeches attempting to express that which is inexpressible in prose, imagery is

absent and intellectualized statements of action are substituted. The only imagery left, generally, for Eliot in the late plays is the often-repeated image of the rose garden of Four Quartets and The Family Reunion, used over and over to express the sense of isolation. It is a perfect image, but it is overworked by the end of The Confidential Clerk. Perhaps one's boredom with that "objective correlative" is the reason for the force of Monica's imagery of love in the first act of The Elder Statesman; it is finally something new.

Why, then, has Eliot failed in creating verse drama that uses verse effectively? One of the reasons for the absence of verse may be that Eliot is no longer trying to dramatize emotion but is, instead, attempting to provoke intellectual action. He is, perhaps, writing social criticism in dramatic form, ironically deploring the absence of true emotion in our society while moving away from emotion in his own work.

Or perhaps the answer is that he turned to writing drama at an unfortunate time -- or continued too long; that he produced most of the plays after he had reached the other side of the peak of poetic perfection, while his poetic powers were waning. But one hates to accept this judgment of one of the greatest poets of the age.

A third answer is that the first theories set forth for verse drama, in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," were the right ones and that the later theories, modified by his experiences with theater, were in error. What might be needed, rather than a verse that reproduces the idiom of contempor-

ary speech, is a verse that is enough different from that idiom so that it can effect the heightening of sensibility so rarely found in today's theater.²⁶ That heightening is accomplished in Murder in the Cathedral; it disappears in the middle plays. The Elder Statesman does not noticeably reaffirm it.

²⁶ Indeed, this ambition for verse is one which Eliot himself states in his essay, "The Social Function of Poetry," in which he names poetic language as a leader of all language.

APPENDIX A

A Chronology of the Major Poems and Plays, with the Essays Concerning Drama

- 1917.....The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
- 1919....." 'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama"
- 1922.....The Waste Land
- 1924....."Four Elizabethan Dramatists"
- 1925.....The Hollow Men
- 1927.....SWEENEY AGONISTES
- 1928....."A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry"
- 1930.....Ash Wednesday
- 1934.....THE ROCK
- 1935.....MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL
- 1939.....THE FAMILY REUNION
- 1946.....Four Quartets completed (published separately)
- 1949.....THE COCKTAIL PARTY
- 1951....."Poetry and Drama"
- 1953.....THE CONFIDENTIAL CLERK
- "The Three Voices of Poetry"
- 1956....."Frontiers of Criticism"
- 1958.....THE ELDER STATESMAN

APPENDIX B

The repeated use of the word, "Poetry," in several contexts eventually demands a definition of that term as it is understood in this paper. None of the stock definitions of poetry, from the concise dictionary summation to the most elaborate qualifications stated by literary critics, seem to completely work for me as a standard which can determine what is and what is not verse.

Obviously, it is too much to expect, in our century, that verse should rhyme or that it should produce delightful and interesting patterns of alliteration, assonance, consonance and other sound devices of tradition. Neither do we demand of poetry that it conform to strict (and, admittedly, artificial) metric patterns of so many iambs or trochees to each line -- or even to a rhythm dependent upon a set number of stressed syllables. Indeed, if this last criterion were enough to establish any given language as poetry, Eliot's versification as worked out for the plays would qualify.

But one of the difficulties of this paper is that my ideal for what is poetry does not seem to conform to Eliot's final definition, a definition not stated so much as implied by what he produces as verse in his latest works. Compared with his early definition of poetry, both as stated in his critical essays and as demonstrated in his poems, -- that it is an expression of the intense emotions beyond the capabilities of prose to express --, his later definition in regards to dramatic verse, that poetry can and should be the

colloquial expression of all thoughts and feelings, is directly contradictory. I find it more satisfying to agree with the earlier definition.

But one's definition of poetry is ultimately a personal one, and almost incapable of expression so that other can accept it, even for the duration of this paper. Reduced to its most basic and most material level, my definition of what is poetic in Eliot's work (and the criteria for poetry are rather different for other poets) demands, most of all, something in the general realm of imagery and, if possible, the lyricism of which he has proven himself capable. To take the lesser demand first, I am delighted with the poet's return to lyric expression in the love scenes (and dedication) of The Elder Statesman. But, for the greater demand, I am appalled by the continued barrenness of a verse which relies on a single, recurring, overworked objective correlative: the rose- or secret-garden.

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